



Why do Millennials Regret Shopping? A Study of Post-Purchase Dissonance Factors in Millennials

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Abstract

Post-purchase cognitive dissonance presents a new challenge for marketers since consumer durable brands rely heavily on repeat customers for their revenue. In fact, even for one-time purchase items like car or laptop, brands depend on customers' positive experience and word of mouth to get more customers and therefore more revenues for them. The present research adds to the existing body of research on consumer behaviour. We investigated the direct and indirect effects (mediated via the one's impulsive buying tendency) of demographics, e.g., gender, age, educational qualification, and family income on participants' experience of cognitive dissonance. It was found that all four demographics that were recorded, e.g., age, gender, educational qualification, and participants' family income, have a significant effect on their experience of post-purchase dissonance. However, gender was found to have no direct impact while age did not have an indirect impact on their cognitive dissonance experience.

Keywords: Cognitive dissonance, millennials, post-purchase dissonance, impulse purchase behaviour, customer satisfaction.

1. Introduction

It is common for all consumers to experience cognitive dissonance about the value of their purchase at least at some point in their life. Cognitive dissonance is a state of mental conflict, and it occurs when there are two conflicting beliefs or when one's actions are at contradiction with their beliefs (McGrath, 2017). The term was first coined by Leon Festinger in 1957 to explain the phenomenon of mental discomfort in the course of an action-belief conflict. One could, for instance, believe that soft drinks are bad for health and still drink it in which case arises a conflict between the action of the person (consuming soft drinks) and their belief (that soft drinks are bad for health). Festinger (1957) proposed that when faced with cognitive dissonance, people attempt to reduce it in either of the four ways. In our example, the best approach to reduce discomfort would be if the person stops consuming soft drinks which will end the conflict between his or her actions and beliefs for once and for all.

However, changing the conflicting behaviour isn't the only approach to dissonance reduction and certainly not the most popular one. So, instead of changing the conflicting behaviour, one could also try to reduce dissonance by (i) modifying the conflicting cognition, e.g., the person

in our example could convince themselves that consuming soft drinks once in a while would not affect their health significantly; (ii) adding new behaviour or cognition, for instance, the person in our example could commit to daily 30-minute gym to minimize the bad effects of consuming soft drinks, or; (iii) by ignoring or denying the information that conflicts with existing beliefs, the person in our example, for instance, may switch to the so-called 'less-sugar' soft drinks to convince themselves that the soft drink they take is not as bad for health.

In the case of retail, customers tend to experience post-purchase dissonance in one of three scenarios: (i) when the buyer feels unsure about the utility of the purchase; (ii) when the purchased product fails to meet the expectations of the buyer, and; (iii) when the buyer is doubtful of their purchasing decision (Powers & Jack, 2015). Scholars have also suggested that consumers experience cognitive dissonance in the pre-purchase stage as well. It happens so that a myriad of choices within a product category confuses the consumer and makes the decision-making process inefficient (Koller & Salzberger, 2007).

The present research intends to investigate the impact of consumers' demographics, e.g., sex, age, and family income, on their experience of post-purchase cognitive dissonance. We also investigate whether a consumer's tendency to buy impulsively mediates the influence of demographics on their experience of post-purchase dissonance.

2. Theoretical Framework & Research Hypotheses

Post-purchase dissonance

In the case of retail, customers tend to experience post-purchase dissonance in one of three scenarios: (i) when the buyer feels unsure about the utility of the purchase; (ii) when the purchased product fails to meet the expectations of the buyer, and; (iii) when the buyer is doubtful of their purchasing decision (Powers & Jack, 2015). Unplanned and impulsive purchasing is likely to lead to post-purchase dissonance as described in the first scenario. Imam (2013) points out that impulsive buyers are likely to experience post-purchase dissonance more frequently and more intensely than non-impulsive buyers.

Coming to the second scenario, it illustrates the classic case of too much promised too little delivered. And, finally, the third scenario, for instance, is likely to occur when the buyer couldn't make out between two or more choices when buying the product. For example, a person, after months of research, may have shortlisted two laptop models that fit their need and budget. Of course, the buyer can buy only one of these models. Regardless of whichever laptop model the person buys at the end, it is likely for many to doubt their decision long after their purchase. In their research on cognitive dissonance among consumers buying smartphones, Jamwal & Pandey (2016) had found that costly purchase was associated with higher level of dissonance. In other words, people are more likely to experience dissonance when the value of the purchase is high, such as in the case of a smartphone, laptop, car, or house. The costlier the purchase, the more likely is it that the buyer would experience post-purchase dissonance.

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Millennial consumers

Millennials constitute the most attractive market segment for marketers since, as of 2020's, they comprise the young working-age population in their 20s and 30s (born between 1980-2000; Rainer & Rainer, 2011, p. 14). This means that millennials are in their peak earning-spending age. They are also three times in size of that of Generation X and are largest in size of all generations that has ever existed in the history of human civilization (Valentine & Powers, 2013). As of 2015, India is home to the maximum number of millennials with 209 million Indians born between 1980 to 2000. China comes close with 193 million millennials and US, at third, with 43 million millennials as of 2015 (Euromonitor International, 2015).

Millennial consumers are also the most educated and aware lot of all. They expect businesses to be responsible about the environmental and social impact of their operations and demand companies to change the way they do their business (Ndubisi, 2003). Numerous certifications have come about in the past decade that incentivises good and responsible business conducts. B-Corp, for example, is certification of social and environmental performance issued to for-profit companies. It did not exist before 2007. Why? Because that's how the new consumers, millennials, expect business to conduct their operations. These certifications make it easy for millennial consumers to identify businesses that align with their own values and beliefs.

The internet is one of the defining characteristics of millennials. Millennials born in the 1990's grew up with the internet and those born in the '80s too adapted the internet in their school or college years. For the most part, millennials consume media for upwards of 18 hours a day, and they do so in a variety of ways. These shapes represent a radical departure from the ones preferred by the previous generation. Millennials, on average, check their smartphones 43 times a day and spend 5.4 hours on social media sites. Sports and movies are still popular, but they account for only 14% of total media consumption (Pew Research, 2009).

Millennials also tend to prefer mobile phone to connect to the internet. In a worldwide survey, 80% of those under 35 said they logon to the internet on their smartphone as often as they do so on their laptop/desktop (Hallam, "Ecommerce and Millennials"). As of May 2021, there are more than 780 million internet users in India with smartphone being the preferred device to log on to the internet. Smartphones are more popular in developing countries like India where computers are still out of reach for many. The Indian e-commerce is a key beneficiary of an increased internet access. Despite depressed consumer spending, economic slowdown and uncertainty created due to Covid-19, e-commerce players are expecting strong sales growth in 2021.

Between 2019-24, the Indian e-commerce is expected to grow at 27% year-on-year. The total sales volume is estimated to grow to US \$99 billion by 2024 (IBEF, Indian E-commerce Industry Analysis). Clothes and apparels, electronics, and home decor are the most bought categories in the Indian e-retail space, according to Grabon findings. Jewellery, beauty and personal care products, and online grocery are catching up as well. Like the traditional brick and mortar stores, various retail attributes such as visual appeal, price, delivery time, word of mouth, and brand loyalty influence consumer behaviour in the online space too.

Influence of demographics on post-purchase dissonance

Researchers have found some major differences in the consumer behaviour and experience of male v. female consumers. Women consumers showed greater price consciousness than their male counterparts (Valentine & Powers, 2013), and were more risk averse and expressed less trust for internet content (Sanchez-Franco et al., 2009). Men trusted e-retail and shopped online more frequently than women consumers (McMahan et al., 2009). Compared to male consumers, women also showed a slightly greater impulsive buying tendency (Gallup, 2014) but were found to be comparatively less prone to post-purchase dissonance (Jamwal & Pandey, 2016).

Jamwal & Pandey (2016) had also found that younger consumers were more prone to experience higher levels of post-purchase dissonance than elder consumers. Gallup (2014) found some interesting inter-generational consumer behaviour differences. According to his findings, millennials were more prone to impulsive buying than Generation X. In a survey of 230 adults, Simcock et al. (2006) found that risk perception and satisfaction in consumer decision making were different for consumers of different age groups.

Marketers have also used demographics, including income and educational background, for market segmentation and selective targeting of campaigns (Dolnicar et al., 2018). At the same time, we found few research studying the influence of demographics on customers' experience of cognitive dissonance. Based on these findings and the abovementioned research gap, we formulate the following hypotheses for the present research.

H₁1: *Age has no effect on experience of cognitive dissonance.*

H₁2: *Male millennials show greater level of cognitive dissonance.*

H₁3: *Low-income millennials show greater level of cognitive dissonance.*

H₁4: *Consumers' experience of cognitive dissonance differs based on their education.*

Effect of impulsive buying on post-purchase dissonance

Impulsive buying behaviour was described by Stern (1962) as any purchase made by the buyer without prior planning. According to Stern, impulse buying can be divided into four major categories, such as "pure," "reminder," "suggestive," and "planned." Consumers interrupt their typical buying patterns to make a novelty purchase instantly when they engage in pure impulse buying. Reminder impulsive buying necessitates recalling earlier product experience or knowledge, which necessitates mental effort. When a customer sees a new product, they may feel compelled to buy it on the spur of the moment. It's possible that suggestion impulse buying is less of an emotional reaction than pure impulse buying. In the context of planned impulse buying, it refers to when customers are willing to make purchases outside of their original budget and are on the lookout for special offers.

Impulse purchase is more common in e-retail, according to several studies. According to Hu et al. (2016), consumers' impulse behaviour may be influenced by their interactions with others on social media platforms. A study by Blazevic et al. (2013) found that social media has increased the power of other customers to influence one's purchasing habits, particularly impulse purchases. Although they did not clearly distinguish between messages from marketers and consumers, Chung & Austria (2012) was one of the earliest researchers to find that attitudes about product messages on social media can influence impulse shopping behaviour.

Verhagen & Dolen (2011) identified a link between browsing an online store and the desire of customers to make an impulsive purchase online. According to previous studies, consumers browse for a variety of reasons, including information gathering as well as entertainment (Floh & Madlberger, 2013). This leads us to conclude that people's browsing behaviour is heavily influenced by both utilitarian and hedonic factors (Poyry et al., 2013). Utilitarian browsers are interested in learning as much as possible about a product before making a purchase. On the other hand, hedonic browsers don't just acquire data to help them make better future purchases; they do it for fun as well. So, while researchers have studied impulsive buying tendency in various consumer studies, the same has not been studied in the context of buyers' experience of cognitive dissonance. Do impulsive buyers tend to experience greater and more frequent dissonance? Or is it the other way around? We attempt to answer these questions in the present research. As such, we have formulated the following hypothesis to test in this research.

H₁₅: *Consumers' impulsive buying tendency has a significant impact on the level of post-purchase dissonance they experience.*

H₁₆: *Consumers' impulsive buying tendency mediates the link between demographics and post-purchase dissonance.*

3. Methodology

Variables

We intend to measure the impact of four demographics (independent variables), e.g., **sex**, **age**, and **educational** and **income** background of consumers on their experience of **post-purchase dissonance** (dependent variable; Grace, 2005). We also intend to measure the direct and indirect impact of a consumer's **impulsive buying tendency** (mediating variable; Weun et al., 1998) on their post-purchase dissonance experience.

Sample Size

The present research investigates the post-purchase dissonance experience of Indian millennial consumers. As of 2015, the population of Indian millennials was estimated to be over 209 million (Euromonitor International, 2015). For the sake of convenience, we take the size of population as infinite and compute the sample size as follows (Mabiru, 2020).

$$S = \frac{Z^2 p(1-p)}{M^2}$$

where,

S is the sample size of an infinite population,

Z is Z-score (= 1.96 for a 95% confidence interval),

p refers to the population proportion (assumed to be 0.5), and

M is the margin of error (taken as 0.05).

Plugging the respective values in the above equation, we get

$$S = 384.16 \approx 400$$

Data collection and analysis

We shared the survey URL in WhatsApp groups and internet forums, and after a month, we had 405 responses following which we closed the survey. In other words, we collected the

data via convenient sampling method. Convenient sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where the researcher approaches eligible candidates using convenient channels such as internet forums and local contacts on a messenger app like WhatsApp. Convenient samples are not representative of their population which violates a core assumption of parametric tests such as correlation and regression. But, as Gignac (2019) explains, we employ these tests anyway.

Out of 405 participants, 261 (64.4%) were men and 144 (35.6%) were women. 180 (44.4%) participants were between the age of 20 to 25 years. Out of the rest, 117 (28.9%) and 108 (26.7%) were between 26-35 and 36-40 years old respectively. Most participants (351 or 86.7%) held a bachelor's degree or above. Only 54 (13.3%) participants were high school graduates only. As of the economic background of participants, Table 2 shows the family income distribution of participants. 60% of them had a family income of less than 4 LPA.

Table 1. Income distribution of participants

Income group	Frequency	Percent (%)	Cumulative %
<2 LPA	126	31.1	31.1
2-4 LPA	117	28.9	60.0
4-10 LPA	99	24.4	84.4
>10 LPA	63	15.6	100.0

Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) is a widely used application for statistical analysis by academicians in the field of social science. Analysis of a Moment Structure (AMOS) is a structure equation modelling tool again widely used by social scientists and academicians. Both applications are owned by IBM corporations. We followed the two-step procedure suggested by Hair et al. (1998) in the analysis: the measurement model and the structural model. We used SPSS v. 26 + AMOS v. 23 to carry out the analysis.

Results & Discussion

Reliability and assumption testing

To validate the reliability of the scales we used in the survey, we measured the scales for Cronbach's alpha. A Cronbach's alpha value of 0.7 or above is considered acceptable for a sample size of >300 (Ponterotto & Charter, 2009). In the first test with 5 items in each of the two scales (refer to Table 1), we got a Cronbach's alpha value of less than 0.7. Upon closer inspection, it was found that the items IBT5 and CDS1 had an item-total correlation of less than 0.3 and the results indicated that deleting these two items would bump up the Cronbach's alpha. So, once again, a reliability test was carried out after deleting the abovementioned two items and the Cronbach's alpha was close 0.697 for both scales (Table 3). Table 4 lists the item-total correlations for each of the four items in the first and the second scale.

Table 2. Reliability Test

Scale	No. of items	Cronbach's α
Impulsive Buying Tendency	4	0.697

Customer Disposition towards Satisfaction 4 0.697

Table 3. Item-total Correlations

Item	Item-total Correlation
IBT1	0.514
IBT2	0.520
IBT3	0.446
IBT4	0.450
CDS1	0.473
CDS2	0.504
CDS3	0.519
CDS4	0.432

Hypothesis testing and SEM

We followed the following steps to further prepare our data for the analysis.

- i. Linear regression only supports continuous scale for dependent variable and continuous scale or dichotomous for independent variables. So, we transformed our variables ‘age’ and ‘family income’ into dichotomous variables. ‘Education’ had only dichotomous response between ‘Std. X/XII’ or ‘Bachelor’s or above’, so we left it as it was.
- ii. A mean was taken for the items in the dependent and the mediating variable. Only four items in each variable were considered when computing the means.
- iii. We tested the assumption of linearity between IBT and CDS. Figure 1 illustrates the linear relation between the two variables on a scatterplot.
- iv. In our regression, we took female participants as our reference point in the regression to estimate the effect of gender on CDS. Similarly, we took the “between 36-40 years” and the “more than 10 LPA” as the age and income reference groups, which is to say that any estimate for other groups is in reference to these two groups.

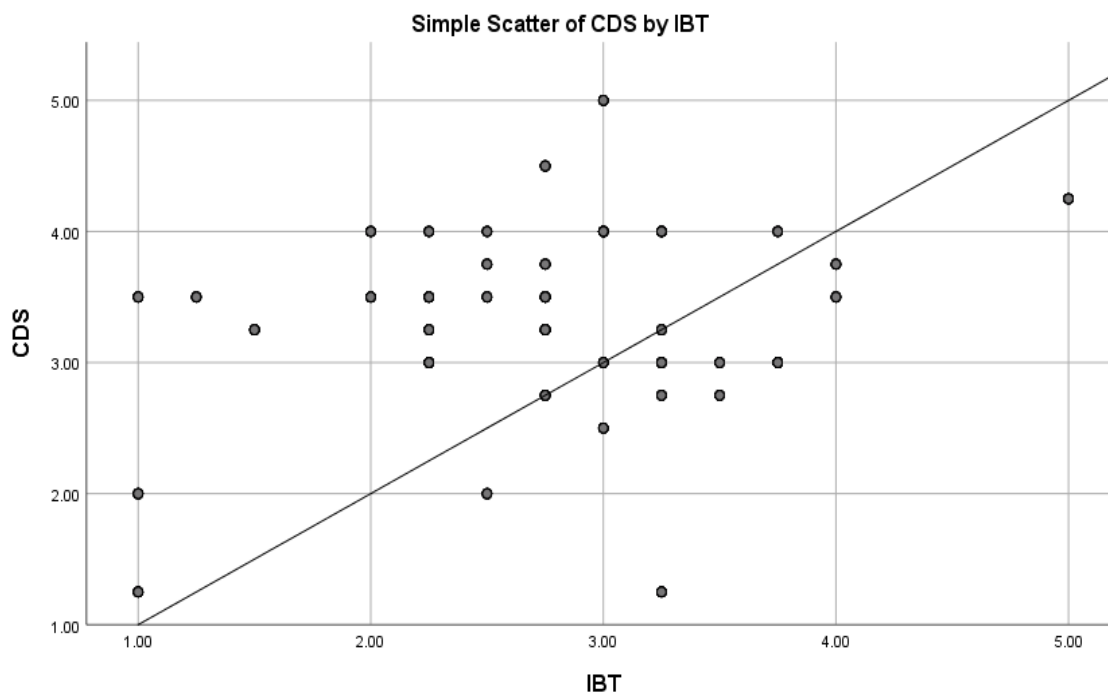


Figure 1. Test of Linearity (IBT-CDS)

Table 4. Estimates

			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
IBT	<---	Education	.763	.110	6.932	***
IBT	<---	Lessthan2	.378	.081	4.675	***
IBT	<---	B2to4	.177	.083	2.150	.032
IBT	<---	B4to10	.389	.087	4.464	***
IBT	<---	Gender	.284	.078	3.634	***
IBT	<---	Lessthan25	.066	.075	.874	.382
IBT	<---	B26to35	.015	.083	.178	.859
CDS	<---	Education	-.105	.104	-1.012	.311
CDS	<---	Lessthan2	.550	.074	7.444	***
CDS	<---	B2to4	.039	.074	.524	.600
CDS	<---	B4to10	.093	.079	1.166	.244
CDS	<---	Gender	.159	.071	2.249	.024
CDS	<---	Lessthan25	-.222	.067	-3.316	***
CDS	<---	B26to35	.126	.073	1.712	.087
CDS	<---	IBT	.151	.044	3.413	***

We make the following observations from Table 5.

- Age has a direct effect on post-purchase dissonance. With the 36-40 years group as the reference point, participants in the 26-35 years group experienced a slightly more dissonance while those between 20-25 years old experienced less dissonance. We therefore reject the null hypothesis H_{01} .
- Male millennials tend to experience post-purchase dissonance slightly more than female millennial consumers (estimate = 0.159 and $p < 0.05$). Gender thus has a direct (though small) effect on CDS. We thus reject the null hypothesis H_{02} .
- With reference to the income group “more than 10 LPA”, only those earning less than 2 LPA had a significant difference in experience of post-purchase dissonance. Income therefore has a direct effect on CDS, and we reject the null hypothesis H_{03} .
- A participants’ educational qualification has no direct effect on one’s experience of post-purchase dissonance and we thus failed to reject the null hypothesis H_{04} .
- A millennial consumer’s tendency to buy impulsively has a direct effect on their experience of post-purchase dissonance (CDS). We reject the null hypothesis H_{05} .
- IBT also mediates the effect of gender, education, and income on CDS. It does not mediate the effect of age on CDS, however. We thus reject the null hypothesis H_{06} .

Tables 6, 7 and 8 illustrate the direct, indirect (mediated via IBT), and total effects of demography, e.g., gender, educational qualification, age and income, on a participant’s experience of CDS (post-purchase dissonance). Education has no direct effect on CDS while age has no indirect effect (mediated through IBT) on CDS. The total effect of each of the independent variables are listed in Table 8. Please note that the estimates for age and income groups are in reference to the age and income groups of 36-40 years and >10 LPA. Figure 2 indicates the standardized β indicated in a structure equation model (SEM).

Table 5. Direct Effects of Gender, Age, and Income on CDS

	Gender (male)	Educ. (UG+)	Age (20-25)	Age (26-35)	Income (<2L)	Income (2-4L)	Income (4-10L)
CDS	.159	*	-0.212	*	.550	*	*

* $p > 0.05$

Table 6. Indirect Effects of Gender, Education, and Income on CDS

	Gender (male)	Educ. (UG+)	Age (20-25)	Age (26-35)	Income (<2L)	Income (2-4L)	Income (4-10L)
CDS	.043	.115	*	*	.057	.027	.059

* $p > 0.05$

Table 7. Total Effects of Gender, Age, Education and Income on CDS

	Gender (male)	Educ. (UG+)	Age (20-25)	Age (26-35)	Income (<2L)	Income (2-4L)	Income (4-10L)
CDS	.202	.115	-0.212	*	.607	.027	.059

* $p > 0.05$

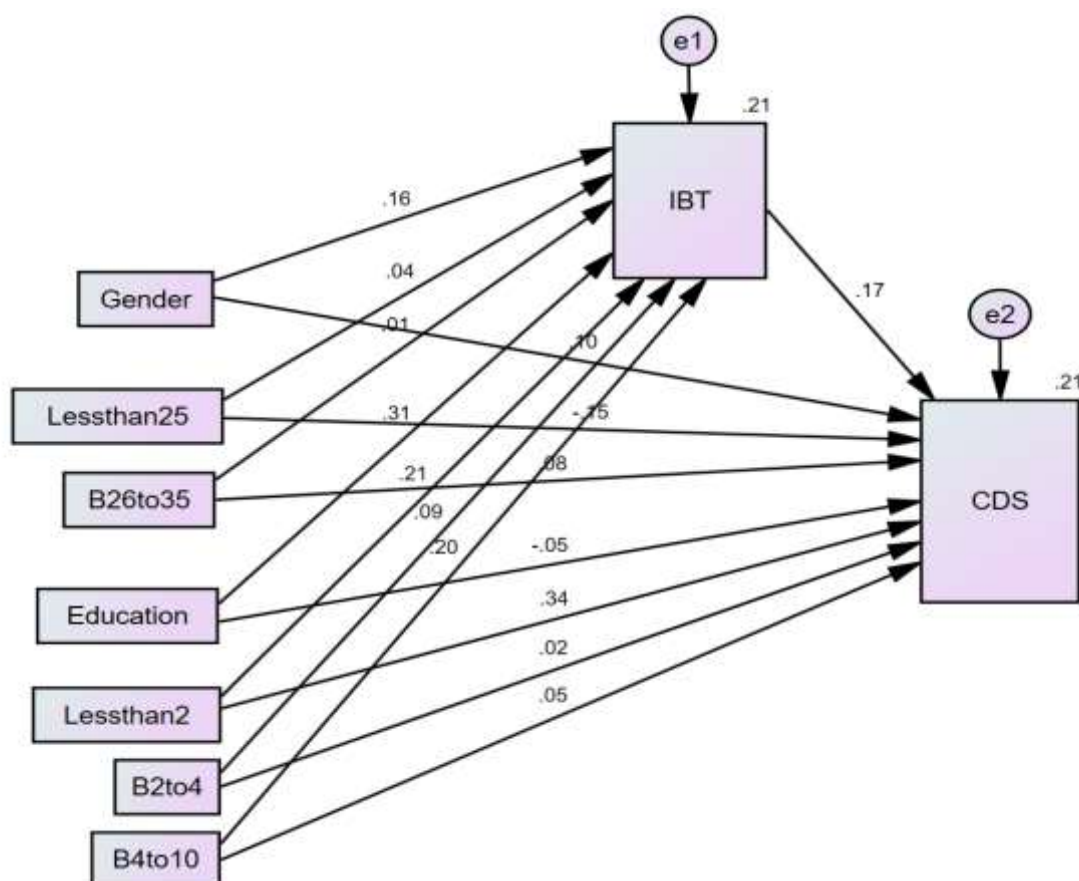


Figure 2. SEM

4. Conclusion

Post-purchase cognitive dissonance presents a new challenge for marketers since consumer durable brands rely heavily on repeat customers for their revenue. In fact, even for one-time purchase items like car or laptop, brands depend on customers' positive experience and word of mouth to get more customers and therefore more revenues for them. Past consumer behaviour studies have found a significant effect of demographics such as age, gender and socio-economic background of a consumer on their purchase behaviour, such as their tendency to purchase on impulse, and their experience of post-purchase cognitive dissonance. In light of such literature, the present research adds to the existing body of research on consumer behaviour. We investigated the direct and indirect effects of demographics, e.g., gender, age, educational qualification, and family income on participants' experience of cognitive dissonance. We measured the indirect effects mediated via their impulsive buying tendency (IBT). Over 400 Indian millennials were surveyed for the research.

It was found that all four demographics that were recorded, e.g., age, gender, educational qualification, and participants' family income, have a significant effect on their experience of post-purchase dissonance. However, gender was found to have no direct impact while age did not have an indirect impact on their cognitive dissonance experience.

The total effect difference recorded for male millennials and participants with a bachelor's degree or above was small (refer to Table 8). With the 36-40 years group as reference, young millennials (20-25 years) experienced slightly (less) dissonance. With the higher income group (>10 LPA) as our reference point, those with an income between 2-10 LPA

experienced negligibly higher dissonance. It is, however, participants with a family income of less than 2 LPA who experienced a much higher dissonance than any of the other income groups.

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